

# Deception and self-deception in Ovid's *Amores*

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When the Roman love-elegist professes passionate love for his mistress, he appears to do so with heartfelt sincerity. But how straightforward is this? In his *Amores* (Love Poems), Ovid the poet-lover sometimes deceives and sometimes is deceived – but sometimes we cannot be sure who is deceiving whom, especially when we read one poem in the light of another. In his poems Ovid exposes the deceptiveness not just of his sincerity, but also of his insincerity. Deception itself is a fundamental ingredient in elegiac love and love-elegy, such that the elegist – in order to be an elegist – sincerely yearns to be deceived.

*But you! Invent elegies – deceptive work – this be your camp!  
Let the rest of the throng write after your example.*

With these words, Apollo summoned the young Propertius to a career in love-elegy. Now recalled in a flashback at the end of that career, the god's enigmatic description of elegy as 'deceptive work' (*fallax opus*) points to an essential aspect of the genre Propertius did so much to shape – its deceptiveness. The lovelorn poet frequently claims to be deceived by his mistress, yet simultaneously sets about trying to beguile her, and leaves us wondering if it is not we who are duped by his pose of sincerity. This is a genre which plays very serious games of deception – of the poet-lover by his mistress, of the mistress by the poet-lover, of the reader by the poet.

As Apollo predicted, there were others who wrote after Propertius' example. In Ovid, however, Propertius found no slavish imitator, but a poet who interrogated, turned inside-out, and – on most analyses – gleefully bankrupted the 'deceptive work' of elegy. Little wonder that *Amores* 3 was to be the last collection of Roman love-elegy in the strict sense.

## Love at the Circus Maximus

Yet, in Ovid's hands, the genre also took on new vitality. This paradox is well illustrated by *Amores* 3.2, an elegy which exposes the poet-lover's deceptive hypocrisy, and yet is one of Ovid's most dramatic and apparently spontaneous

creations. Describing a day at the chariot-races with his *domina* ('mistress'), Ovid recreates the excitement and bustle of the Circus Maximus: the close-packed seating; the jostling crowd; the heat and dust; the pre-race parade of gods (Victory, Neptune, Mars, Phoebus, Diana, Minerva, Ceres, Bacchus, Castor, Pollux, and Venus), each applauded by their acolytes; the four-horse chariots charging from the starting-gates; the high hopes for the favourite driver, and the despair – *me miserum!* – when he botches the turn and is overtaken on the inside; the crowd clamouring for a restart; the multicoloured teams darting forth once more, this time with the favourite in the lead and breaking into the open; and he wins!

The poem reads more like a live sports commentary than love-elegy. From the very start, however, Ovid reveals that chariot-racing is not the sport in which he is interested: 'You look at the races, I at you', he says as though to his mistress, 'let us each look at what takes our fancy, and each feed our own eyes' (5–6). Clearly, his mistress is deceived if she thinks that her companion's enthusiasm for the races is devoid of ulterior motive! Everything about the circus is a pretext for something else (the close-packed seating for physical contact; the jostling crowd, heat and dust for displays of chivalry; the lifting of her trailing dress for a glimpse of her legs; the procession of gods for invoking the help of Victory and Venus). As Ovid's one-track mind takes over, the race itself becomes a wickedly salacious metaphor, with Ovid's hopes for 'victory' riding on the fortunes of his mistress' favourite

charioteer:

*Make my mistress' prayers, make mine, come true!  
My mistress' prayers have come true, mine are still to come.  
He is holding the victory palm, mine remains to be won! (80–82)*

## The art of seduction

In his handbook on courtship and seduction, the *Ars Amatoria* ('The Art of Love'), Ovid explicitly prescribes the circus as a venue to which the aspiring Casanova should take his mistress. Now speaking in a less 'live' and spontaneous register, the poet-teacher advises his pupil to ascertain which team his mistress supports, to exploit the seating arrangements, to put on an act of chivalry, to lift up and glance under her dress, to flick away that speck of dust (even if there is none there to flick, he adds): 'it's the little things that capture their light minds'. Just as we suspected, the poet-lover of the *Amores* really is a cynical actor who employs every resource at his disposal to beguile an unsuspecting girl. Re-reading *Amores* 3.2 in the light of the *Ars*, the lover's spontaneity is exposed as premeditated deception.

However, the poet-teacher of the *Ars* also reveals something the savvy or cynical reader of the *Amores* might not have suspected: that he who sets out to beguile can in the process beguile himself! Circus games and gladiatorial shows offer the same opportunities, explains the poet-teacher, but let the pupil beware: 'in that arena Venus' boy has often fought, and he who watches the wounds is dealt a wound ... and himself has become part of the spectacle'. Re-reading the *Ars* in the light of the *Amores*, then, the dispassionate textbook is undone by the spontaneity of true passion. Perhaps the reader, too, was deceived in thinking the lover's sincerity was all pretence.

## Games of deception

Layers of deception are built up through contrasting passages within the *Amores* too. A number of elegies relate to contemporary adultery legislation which sought

to enforce chastity on wives. The Ovidian poet-lover narrowly avoids incriminating himself (e.g., does *vir* mean ‘man’ or ‘husband’?), but it is clearly adulterous deception he has in mind. In *Amores* 3.4, the poet-lover exhorts a *vir* to drop his guard on his ‘wife’, since locking her up will only make her more desirous of other men (so it is claimed), as well as more desirable to them (so it is revealed): men enjoy the challenge of what is ‘hard to get’, but also, more darkly, the allure of a girl who says *timeo* (‘I’m afraid’, 32). Surely deception is afoot: if the poet-lover can’t get access to the woman, then according to his own logic he must desire her more, and so we must suspect him of trying to hoodwink the husband with his specious logic (i.e., ‘if you don’t guard her, I won’t seduce her, *I promise*’).

Yet, in *Amores* 2.19, the poet-lover exhorts a man, conversely, to guard his partner more closely, since his lax security has taken all the fun out of clandestine courtship. The premise is identical to that of 3.4 (forbidden fruit is alluring) but the advice is quite the opposite. Now Ovid turns the stock elegiac situation on its head (the poet-lover typically pleads for access to the girl) and positively revels in conventional elegiac despair. In the light of our suspicions about 3.4, we might detect some cunning reverse-psychology here too (i.e., ‘I’m telling you to start guarding the girl because it sharpens my desire [but I actually want you to continue not guarding her so that I’ll be able to satisfy that desire]’).

Alternatively, taken at face value, *Amores* 2.19 informs our reading of 3.4 (and of elegy in general): the poet-lover’s request for tightened security reveals that, without occasion for deception, the ‘deceptive work’ of elegy would cease to exist. Unchallenged and frustrated, the lover admonishes the *vir* he longs to cuckold: ‘your tolerance will be the end of love (*finis amoris*)’. In the light of this revelation, the reader of 3.14 can now see that, in arguing for easy access to the girl, this apparently more normative elegy in fact argues against the very conditions that give rise to elegiac love. Thus, if the poet-lover’s argument convinces, it will indeed spell the *finis amoris*. The end of the *Amores* fulfils this possibility when Ovid bids farewell to love-elegy. Perhaps, then, there was no deception afoot in 3.4, and we were deceived in assuming there was.

### Is honesty the best policy?

In the penultimate elegy of the book (*Amores* 3.14), Ovid turns the deception upon himself by asking his mistress to deceive him:

*my censure does not command you  
to become chaste,  
but requests that you at least try to  
pretend. (3–4)*

Ovid has once more turned an elegiac convention upside-down: that the poet-lover is deceived is typical, that he asks to be deceived is atypical. The poet-lover’s plea also confirms, implicitly, the absence of the deception that drives elegy: ‘my mind fails and I die whenever you confess your sins’ (37). Deprived of its *raison d’être* by an honest mistress, the ‘deceptive work’ of elegy has run out of material: ‘to be deceived will be as a boon’ (42), pleads the poet-lover in vain, as he promises to turn a blind eye even to his mistress’ most flagrant infidelities, provided that she deny them.

In this exquisite paradox Ovid exposes the insincerity and fictiveness of elegy: it is implausible that a lover could be deceived by a person he instructs to deceive him. Or is it? How fictional is the character who would rather not know about the infidelities of the person s/he loves? Are we deceiving ourselves by relegating the elegiac lover to the realm of fiction by analysing his self-contradictions as nothing more than a deceptive game? What indeed could be more deceptive than elegiac love? What more seductive, or perplexing, than love-elegy?

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